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# Simulated Space Environment Effects on a Candidate Solar Sail Material

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## Abstract

For long duration missions of solar sail vehicles, the sail material needs to survive the harsh space environment as the degradation of the sail material determines its operational lifetime. Therefore, understanding the effects of the space environment on the sail membrane is essential for mission success. In this study, the effect of simulated space environments of ionizing radiation and thermal aging were investigated. In order to assess some of the potential damage effects on the mechanical, thermal and optical properties of a commercial off the shelf (COTS) polyester solar sail membrane. The solar sail membrane was exposed to high energy electrons (about 70 keV and 10 nA/cm$^2$), and the physical properties were characterized. After about 8.3 Grad dose, the tensile modulus, tensile strength and failure strain of the sail membrane decreased by 20 to 95%. The aluminum reflective layer was damaged and partially delaminated but it did not show any significant change in solar absorbance or thermal emittance. The mechanical properties of a pre-cracked sample, simulating potential impact damage of the sail membrane, as well as thermal aging effects on metallized PEN (polyethylene naphthalate) film, will be discussed.

## Nomenclaure

### Symbols

| | |
|---|---|
| $\chi_c$ | crystallinity |
| $H_f$ | heat of fusion |
| $w_f$ | specific total work of fracture |
| $w_e$ | specific essential work of fracture |
| $w_p$ | non-essential work (plastic deformation) |
| $\beta$ | proportionality constant (plastic zone shape factor) |
| $L$ | ligament length |

### Subscripts

| | |
|---|---|
| $f$ | fusion (or melting) |
| $e$ | essential contribution |
| $p$ | plastic deformation (non-essentional contribution) |

### Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ASTM | American Society for Testing Materials |
| COTS | Commercial Off the Shelf |
| CTE | Coefficient of Thermal Expansion |
| DENT | Double-Edge Notched Tension |
| DMA | Dynamic Mechanical Analyzer |
| DSC | Differential Scanning Calorimetry |
| EWF | Essential Work of Fracture |
| FT-IR | Fourier Transform Infrared |
| HRSEM | High-Resolution Scanning Electron Microscope |

| | |
|---|---|
| IR | Infrared |
| MD | Machine Direction |
| MDSC | Modulated Differential Scanning Calorimeter |
| MSFC | Marshall Space Flight Center |
| NASA | National Aeronautics and Space Administration |
| PEN | Polyethylene Naphthalate |
| PET | Polyethylene Terephthalate |
| SEM | Scanning Electron Microscopy |
| TD | Transverse Direction |
| TMA | Thermomechanical Analyzer |
| UV | Ultraviolet |
| UV-VIS-IR | Ultraviolet-Visible-Infrared |

# 1. Introduction

Solar sails are attractive spacecraft propulsion systems that offer extended mission capability by deriving thrust directly from momentum transfer of solar photons, rather than onboard fuel [1-2]. The transferred photon momentum is very small but the acceleration can be maximized by increasing the surface area of the sail. For long duration missions, the sail material needs to survive temperature fluctuations, ultraviolet (UV) rays, ionizing radiation, ultrahigh vacuum, and micrometeoroid impacts [3-7]. Since the degradation of the sail material controls the operational lifetime, understanding the effects of the space environment on the sail membrane is essential for mission success.

There have been several studies of space environment effects on candidate sail materials such as aluminized Mylar® (polyethylene terephthalate, PET), Teonex® (polyethylene naphthalate, PEN), CP1™ (colorless polyimide) and Kapton® polyimide [5-7]. After exposure of high energy electrons, protons and UV rays, the degradation of physical properties of sail materials was determined. However, there is no systematic study to investigate the chemical changes induced in the polymer under simulated space environment exposure.

In this study, we simulated the effect of the space environment of ionizing radiation, thermal aging, and impact damage on mechanical, thermal, and optical properties of a commercial off the shelf (COTS) polyester membrane to assess the degradation mechanisms on a feasible solar sail. A quantitative study of space environment effects on the solar sail can provide design guidelines to increase the reliability of solar sails, resulting in increased acceptance of this type of propulsion system.

# 2. Experimental

## 2.1. Materials

PEN (Figure 1) as a sail core membrane was purchased from Dupont Teijin (Teonex® Q72, 2μm thick). Metallized PEN was prepared by deposition of aluminum (1000Å) on the front side

of the membrane as a reflective layer and chromium (150Å) on the back side of the membrane as a thermal emitter, respectively (Astral Technology Unlimited, Inc.).

## 2.2. Electron Irradiation Tests

Electron irradiation tests were performed by the Space Environmental group at NASA Marshall Space Flight Center (MSFC). The metallized PEN film was exposed to electron radiation for nineteen days with a fluence of $1.04 \times 10^{17}$ electrons/cm$^2$. The electron beam energy and current were 70keV and 10 nA/cm$^2$, respectively. The total exposure dosage was approximately 8.3 Grad. A Hitachi S-5000 high-resolution scanning electron microscope (HRSEM), with a field emission electron gun and in-lens detector, was used to examine the surface morphology of the metallized PEN film. Infrared (IR) spectra were taken in transmission mode with a Fourier Transform Infrared (FT-IR) spectrometer (Nicolet iS$^{TM}$ 5).

## 2.3. Thermal Analysis

Viscoelastic behavior of the metallized PEN film was characterized from storage and loss modulus at a heating rate of 1°C/min and 1 Hz in a dynamic mechanical analyzer (DMA Q800, TA Instruments). Thermal properties of melting, crystalline, and glass transition temperature of the metallized PEN film were characterized at a heating rate of 3°C/min with a modulation of ±0.47°C for every 60 seconds using a modulated differential scanning calorimeter (MDSC, Q2000, TA Instruments). Coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) was determined from the dimension change at a heating rate of 5°C/min in a thermomechanical analyzer (TMA, model 202, Netzsch).

## 2.4. Thermal Aging Tests

The metallized PEN film was exposed to elevated temperatures, and the mechanical and optical properties were measured. The films were affixed to glass slides to prepare for treatment at temperatures ranging from 75 to 275°C. The specimens were placed in a nitrogen purged convection oven (Blue M) and held at the treatment soak temperature for ten minutes. The treated specimens were examined under an optical microscope in reflectance and transmittance mode to examine cracking. Ultraviolet-visible-infrared (UV-VIS-IR) spectroscopy (PerkinElmer, Lambda 1050 spectrometer) was performed in reflectance mode to determine the reflectivity from 250 to 2400 nm at room temperature.

## 2.5. Mechanical Property Tests

Tensile properties of the PEN film were characterized according to American Society for Testing Materials (ASTM) Standard D882-12 [8]. Specimens (about 5 mm wide) were placed between grips with a gauge length of about 50 mm and tested at a rate of 5 mm/minute until failure.

Mode I tearing tests were performed to calculate the essential work of fracture (EWF). Samples were prepared by cutting along two directions [machine direction (MD) and transverse direction (TD) of a film roll] to see the effect of cutting direction. Double-edge notched tension (DENT)

specimens 20 mm wide with 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 mm ligament lengths were prepared using a straightedge and razor blade. The specimens were gripped with an initial gauge length of 40 mm and tested at a rate of 0.1 mm/minute until failure. The setup for this test is shown in Figure 2. Load-displacement graphs were generated, and the essential work of fracture calculated.

Tear-propagation resistance in Mode III for the metallized PEN film was evaluated using ASTM Standard D1938-14 [9]. Trouser-shaped specimens 25 mm wide and 75 mm long with a vertical pre-crack of 50 mm were prepared using a straightedge and razor blade. The specimens were gripped at the two panels created by the crack with an initial grip separation of 50 mm. The top grip was extended at a rate of 250 mm/minute until the tear propagated through the entire length of the specimen, and load-displacement plots were generated. The setup for this test is shown in Figure 3.

To simulate potential impact damage on the sail membrane, holes and slits were introduced before tensile testing of the metallized PEN film. Specimens 20 mm wide with a gauge length of 100 mm were prepared. The pre-cracks of 2 mm width were made with a razor blade and a 2 mm diameter circular die (Figure 4). Tensile testing was performed with an extension rate of 5 mm/minute and load-displacement graphs generated.

# 3. Results

## 3.1. Electron Irradiation

Figure 5 shows the appearance change of the metallized PEN film after electron irradiation of approximately 8.3 Grad. The irradiated films became wrinkled. This seemed to have originated from induced stress and thermal energy by the electron radiation.

The surface morphology of the film was investigated by scanning electron microscopy (SEM) (Figure 6). Before irradiation, the film showed a smooth aluminum layer. However, after electron irradiation, the aluminum coating was damaged and delaminated exposing the PEN core layer underneath [Figure 6 (b)]. Even though the surface of aluminum coating was damaged, the solar absorbance of the aluminum side was unchanged (0.09 for control PEN film, and 0.09 for electron irradiated PEN film, Table 1). The thermal emittance of the aluminum side of the PEN film slightly increased from 0.05 for control PEN to 0.09 for irradiated PEN.

Electron radiation exposure of the metallized PEN film led to a decrease in mechanical properties when compared to the control specimens, as shown in Figure 7 and Table 1. The change was obvious even before testing began because the samples were very brittle, and difficult to handle and set up for testing. The elastic modulus of the PEN was reduced from 8.43 GPa to 6.56 GPa, and the exposed specimens broke near one percent elongation, indicating substantial embrittlement. The tensile strength was reduced from approximately 165 MPa to 46 MPa. The degradation of mechanical properties could be explained by chain scission and crosslinking of polymer molecules from the high energy electron radiation.

The electron radiation induced molecular degradation was observed using various experimental techniques. Figure 8 shows storage and loss modulus of metallized PEN film as a function of temperature. The storage modulus of the control PEN film was about 5 – 9 GPa in the range of -60°C to 120°C. Above the glass transition ($\alpha$-transition) of about 140°C, the storage

modulus decreased and was about 1.3 GPa just before crystalline melting ($T_m$) near 270°C. After electron irradiation, both the overall storage modulus and the glass transition decreased (from 140°C to 137°C). The most interesting observation was the significant increase in a loss modulus at $\beta^*$-transition, representing the out-of-plane motions of naphthalene rings or the fluctuation of aggregates of naphthalene rings [10]. The ratio of loss modulus of $\alpha$-transition and $\beta^*$-transition for the electron irradiated PEN film decreased to 0.62 from the 1.19 for the control PEN film, which indicates an increase in the short segmental mobility induced from chain scission of main polymer chains by the high energy radiation.

The chain scission was also established from the differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) thermogram (Figure 9) and FT-IR spectra (Figure 10). The control PEN film shows a clear melting peak at about 260°C with the first heating run and a high crystallinity ($\chi_c$) of about 54%, determined by

$$\chi_c = \Delta H_f(m)/\Delta H_f(c) \quad (1)$$

where $\Delta H_f(m)$ is the measured heat of fusion of the semicrystalline PEN and $\Delta H_f(c)$ is the heat of fusion of 100% crystalline PEN (103J/g) [11]. With the second heating run, it showed a clear glass transition (at about 124°C), a crystalline peak (at about 190°C) and a $T_m$ peak (at about 260°C), in that order. On the contrary, the electron irradiated PEN film showed neither a clear glass transition nor a crystalline peak while showing a broad and small melting peak with the first heating run ($\chi_c$ of about 9%), which results from molecular chain degradation.

Figure 10 shows the change of molecular structure of the metallized PEN film after electron irradiation. Compared to the peak for CH out of plane of aromatic moiety (760 $cm^{-1}$), the peaks of =C-O (1240 $cm^{-1}$), C-O-C (1178 $cm^{-1}$), -O-C (1085 $cm^{-1}$) and $CH_2$ (1374, 1339 $cm^{-1}$) of esters appear less intense, and apparent carboxylic acid characteristic peaks (the broad peak of -OH at about 3000 $cm^{-1}$ and C=O at 1700 $cm^{-1}$) begin to appear. This suggests that the PEN molecules were decomposed to some degree by the electron irradiation to yield carboxylic acid moieties (naphthanoic end groups).

## 3.2. Thermal Aging Tests

Thermal aging of metallized PEN film was examined. Figure 11 shows the coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) of raw PEN film (without metal coatings) and metallized PEN film as a function of temperature. The CTE of the samples varied from about 9 to 13 ppm/°C for the range of 0 ~ 100°C. While the raw PEN films showed a large increase in CTE above the glass transition temperature (around 124°C), the metallized PEN films maintained a low CTE until reaching the melting temperature (about 260°C) because the metallic layers can restrict the macroscopic dimensional change of PEN film. This indicates that the operational limit of the metallized PEN film is more a function of the melting temperature, than the glass transition temperature.

The change in appearance of the metallized PEN films after thermal treatment at various temperatures are shown in Figure 12. The PEN films were dimensionally stable up to about 150°C.

Above 150°C, there was some noticeable shrinkage below the melting temperature (around 260°C). The sample at 300°C, [Figure 12. (h)] resulted in a significant degree of distortion. Cracks on the surfaces were observed by optical microscopy.

Figure 13 shows spectral reflectance of metallized PEN films after thermal aging. The thermally aged metallized PEN films did not exhibit any significant change in reflectance, while the sample treated at 300°C showed a slight decrease in reflectance resulting from thermal distortion leading to surface cracks.

The mechanical properties of metallized PEN films after thermal treatment are shown in Figure 14. The Young's modulus and tensile strength of thermally aged samples decreased slightly, while the elongation at the break of the sample treated at 225°C showed significant reduction. This would indicate that the metallized PEN sustains stable mechanical properties after thermal aging up to about 200°C.

## 3.3. Simulated Impact Damage Effects on Mechanical Properties

The primary cause of concern from micrometeoroids is physical damage upon impact. Erosion of surface materials can change spectral reflectance of sail membrane [3]. Even catastrophic failure can result from strain propagated tearing resulting from impact damage. Thus, tearing properties of a sail membrane as a function of damage geometry should be studied. Mode I tearing fracture of metallized PEN film was examined using the EWF method to separate the essential work to fracture the polymer ($w_e$) from the non-essential geometry-dependent work from plastic deformation ($w_p$) using

$$w_f = w_e + \beta w_p L \quad (2)$$

where $w_f$ is the specific total work of fracture, $\beta$ is proportionality constant (plastic zone shape factor) whose value depends on the geometry of the specimen and the crack and $L$ is ligament length [12-13].

Tensile tests of the DENT specimens with various ligament lengths (Figure 2) were plotted in Figure 15 (a). The load-extension plot shows that the maximum load and extension before failure decreases as the ligament length decreases, while the shape of the plots for varying ligament lengths remains the same. From the load-extension graph, the total work of fracture was calculated to obtain the $w_e$ and $\beta$ [Figure 15 (b) and Table 2]. The $w_e$ of metallized PEN films were 23.8 and 27.3 kJ/m$^2$ for MD and TD, respectively. These measured values are lower than the literature stated range of 55 – 75 kJ/m$^2$, probably because the metallized PEN was manufactured by bi-axially stretching to induce high crystallinity (over 50%). Also, the bubbles in the film, which were discovered using microscopy, can lower fracture toughness. $\beta$, which represents geometry related plastic zone factor was also less than the literature value (5 – 23 MJ/m$^3$).

Mode III tearing fracture toughness was measured by a trouser tear test (Figure 3). The trouser tear specimen was gripped at the two panels created by the pre-crack and the load was recorded with crack propagation induced by the extension of the grip distance. An approximate load of 1.5 mN for the metallized PEN was required for the pre-crack to propagate, which shows that the

material can fail catastrophically under a light load if an edge crack is present. Tearing energy and work are summarized in Table 2.

To investigate the impact damage on the mechanical properties, holes and slits were introduced into the membrane. Metallized PEN films with pre-cracks from a die (2 mm diameter die hole) and blade cuts (2 mm wide slit) failed at a lower load and elongation than control specimens. The 2 mm diameter die cut specimens failed at a tensile stress and strain of approximately 130 MPa and 2.5%. The specimens with a 2 mm wide slit failed at approximately 60 MPa and 1% elongation. Even though the pre-damage was introduced, the induced tensile stress is higher than the biaxial tension level of deployed solar sails [about 0.007 MPa (about 1 psi)] [14].

## 4. Conclusions

The effects of select simulated space environments on mechanical, thermal and optical properties of a COTS polyester, metallized PEN solar sail membrane were investigated by electron irradiation, thermal aging and simulated impact damage tests. After a 8.3 Grad dose of electron irradiation, the tensile modulus, tensile strength and failure strain of metallized PEN film decreased by 20% to 95%. However, the membrane did not show any significant change in optical properties of solar absorbance and thermal emittance of the reflective side (aluminum layer). By thermal and spectroscopic analysis, polymer molecular degradation under electron irradiation was confirmed. Based on thermal aging testing, it is speculated that the operational temperature limit of a metallized PEN sail can be assumed to approach the melting temperature of PEN, with the elongation result from the thermal aging being a better predictor. The pre-cracked specimens that simulate potential impact damage exhibited significant degradation in tensile strength. Further quantitative studies of space environment effects such as proton, UV radiation or combined radiation on the solar sail membrane can provide design guidelines that will increase the reliability of solar sails.

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**Table 1.** Physical properties of the metallized PEN.

| Metalized Film | Modulus (GPa) | Tensile Strength (MPa) | Elongation at Break (%) | Solar Absorbance | Thermal Emittance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Control PEN | 8.43 ± 0.14 | 164.89 ± 5.35 | 18.20 ± 5.97 | 0.09 | 0.05 |
| Electron Irradiated PEN | 6.56 ± 0.23 | 46.42 ± 25.09 | 0.76 ± 0.44 | 0.09 | 0.09 |

**Table 2.** Tear physical properties of the metallized PEN.

| Material | | Mode I Tear Fracture | | Mode III Tear Fracture | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Essential Work of Fracture, $w_e$ (kJ/m$^2$) | Shape Factor, $\beta$ (kJ/m$^3$) | Tearing Energy (N/m) | Tearing Work (N·m) |
| Metallized PEN | [1]MD | 23.8 ± 1.5 | 1.1 ± 0.2 | 1361.0 ± 58.9 | 72.0 ± 3.1 |
| | [2]TD | 27.3 ± 1.4 | 0.9 ± 0.2 | 1517.4 ± 179.2 | 80.2 ± 9.5 |

[1]MD: Machine Direction
[2]TD: Transverse Direction

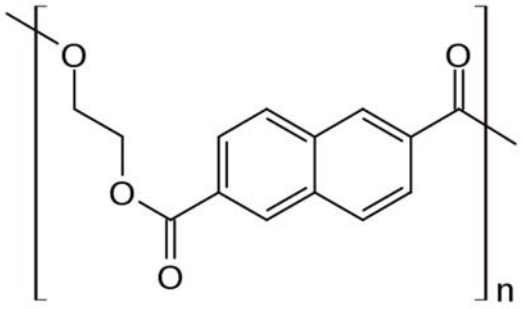



**Figure 1.** Molecular structure of PEN.

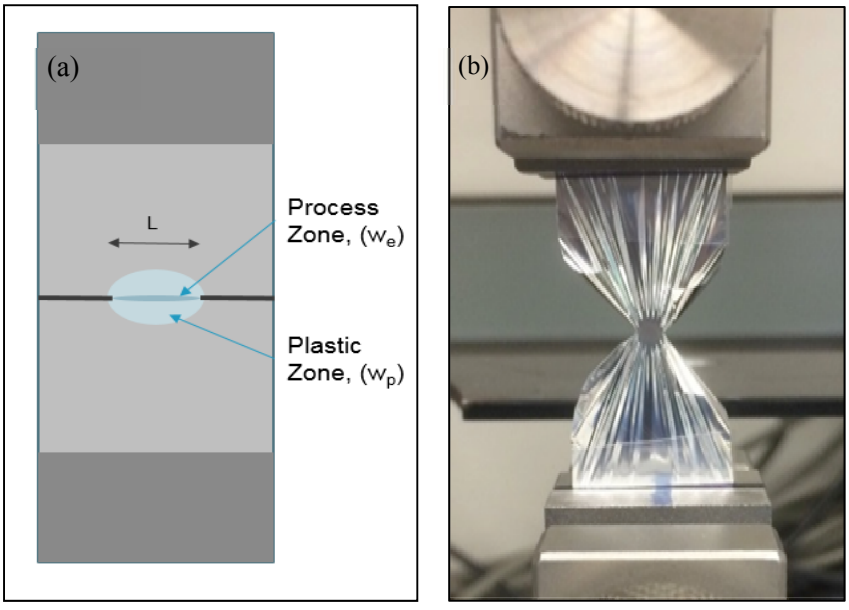



**Figure 2.** (a) Sample preparation and (b) setup during testing for DENT configuration (Mode I tear test).

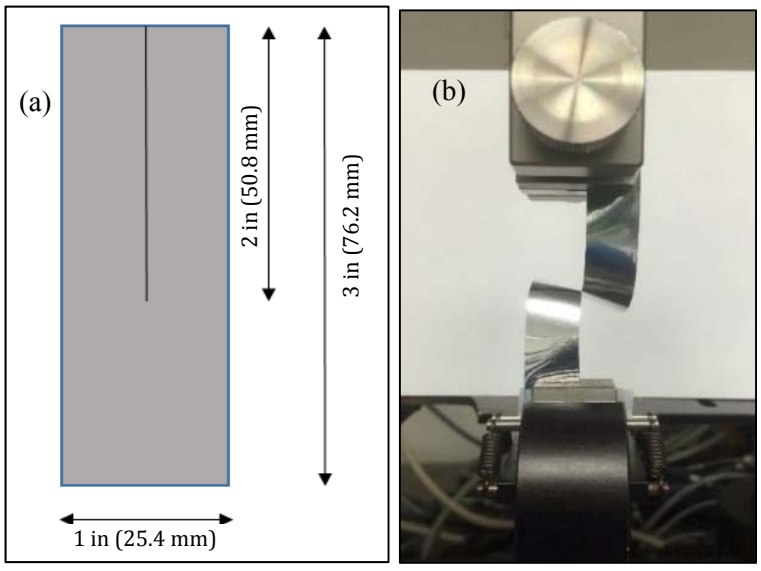



**Figure 3.** (a) Sample configuration and (b) setup during testing for Mode III tear-propagation resistance.

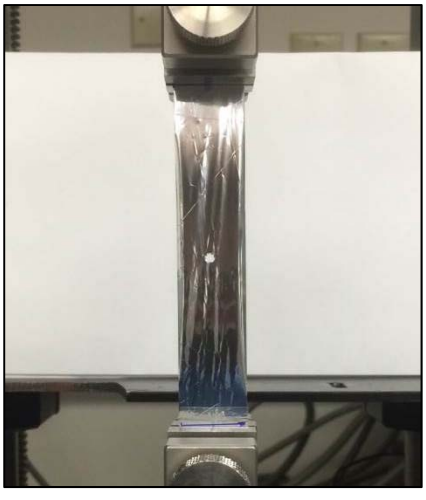


**Figure 4.** Setup for tensile test of metallized PEN films with a 2 mm die-cut hole to simulate potential impact damage.

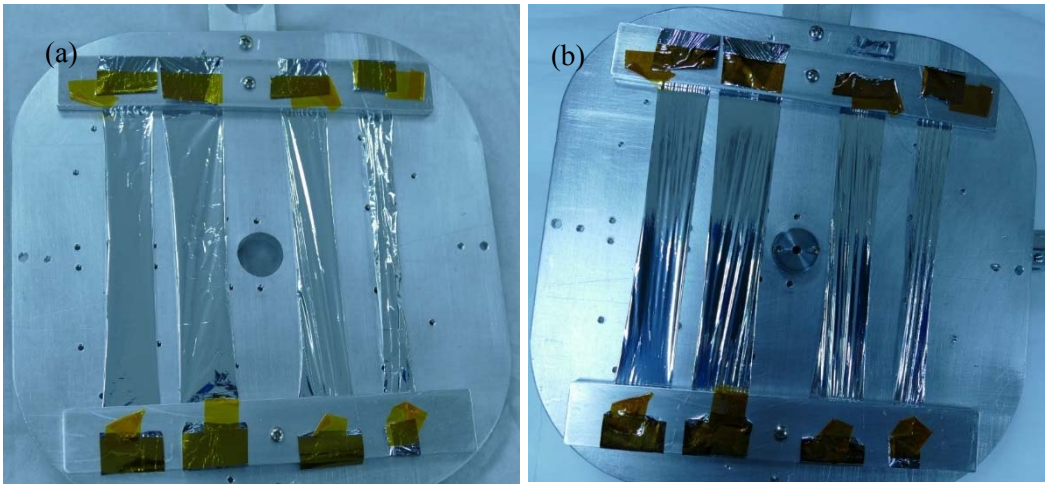



**Figure 5.** Metallized PEN films on the sample holder plate (a) before electron irradiation and (b) after electron irradiation.

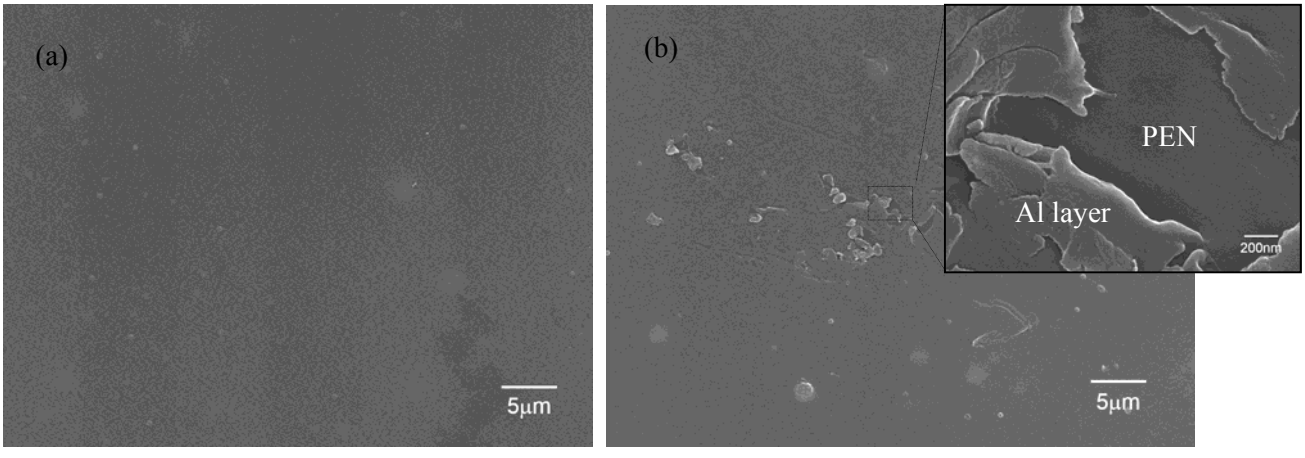
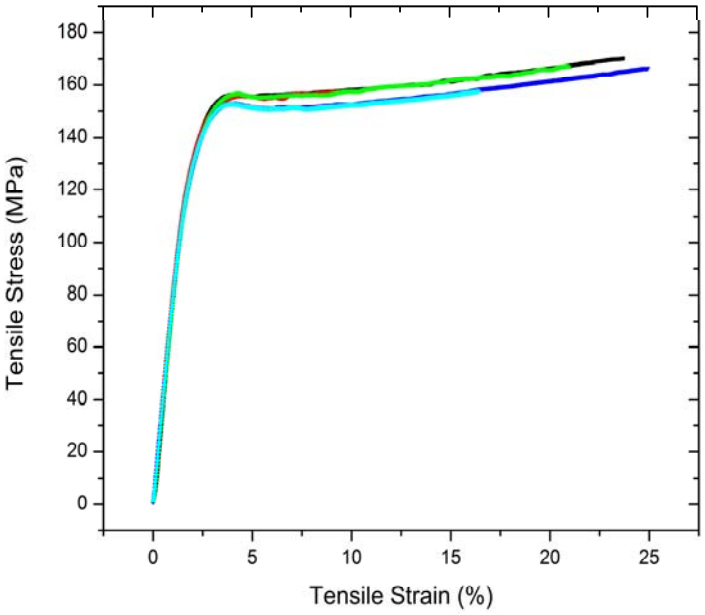



**Figure 6.** SEM image of the aluminum coating surface of the metallized PEN films (a) before electron irradiation and (b) after electron irradiation.

(a)




(b)

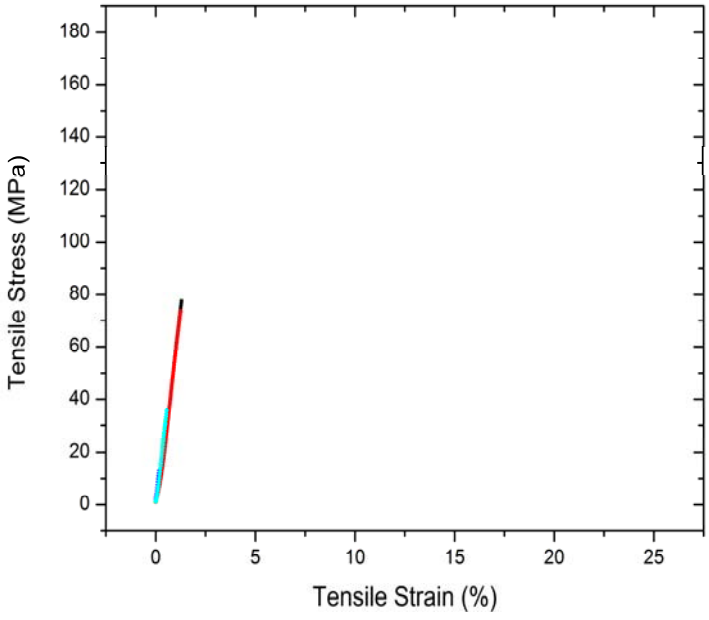



**Figure 7.** Tensile properties of metalized (a) control PEN and (b) electron irradiated PEN films. Each color represents one of 5 tensile test specimens.

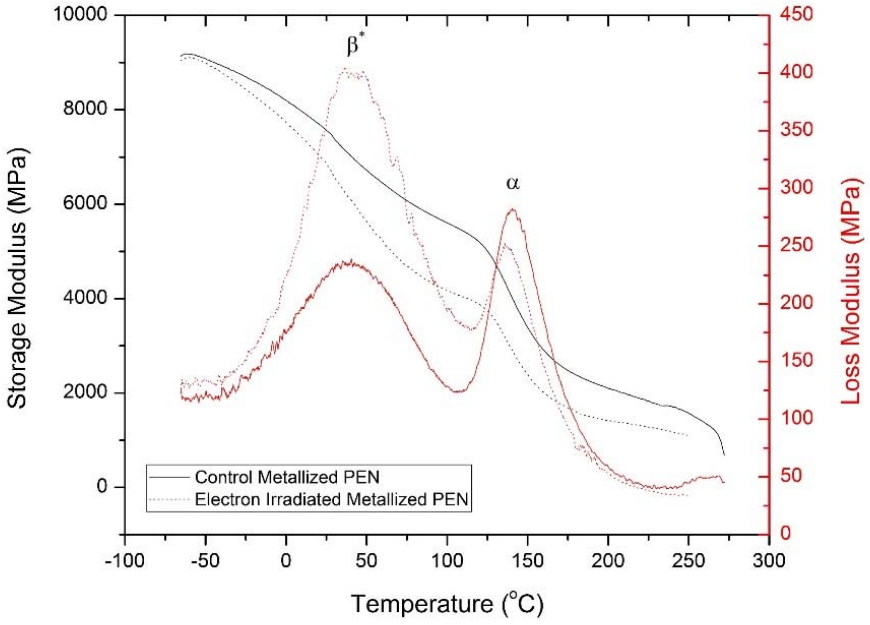



**Figure 8.** DMA curves of control and electron irradiated PEN films.

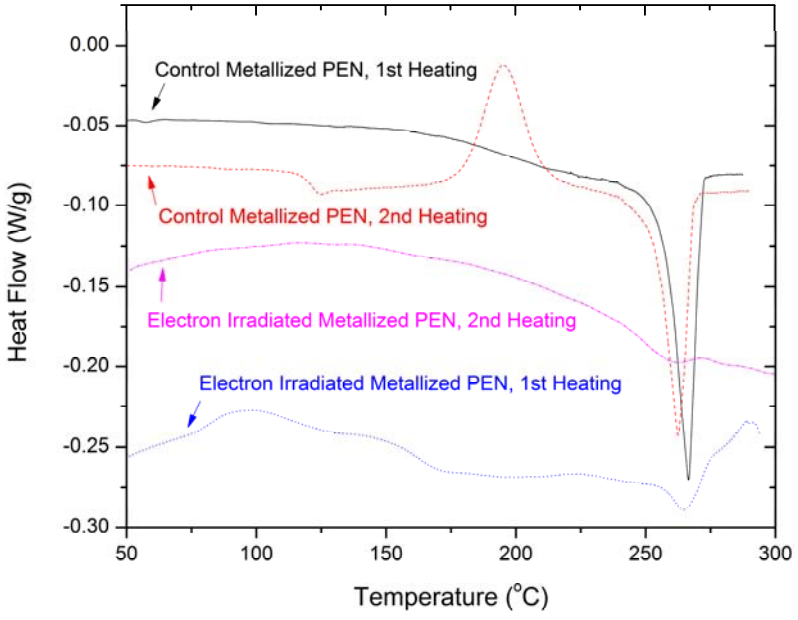



**Figure 9.** DSC thermograms of control and electron irradiated PEN films.

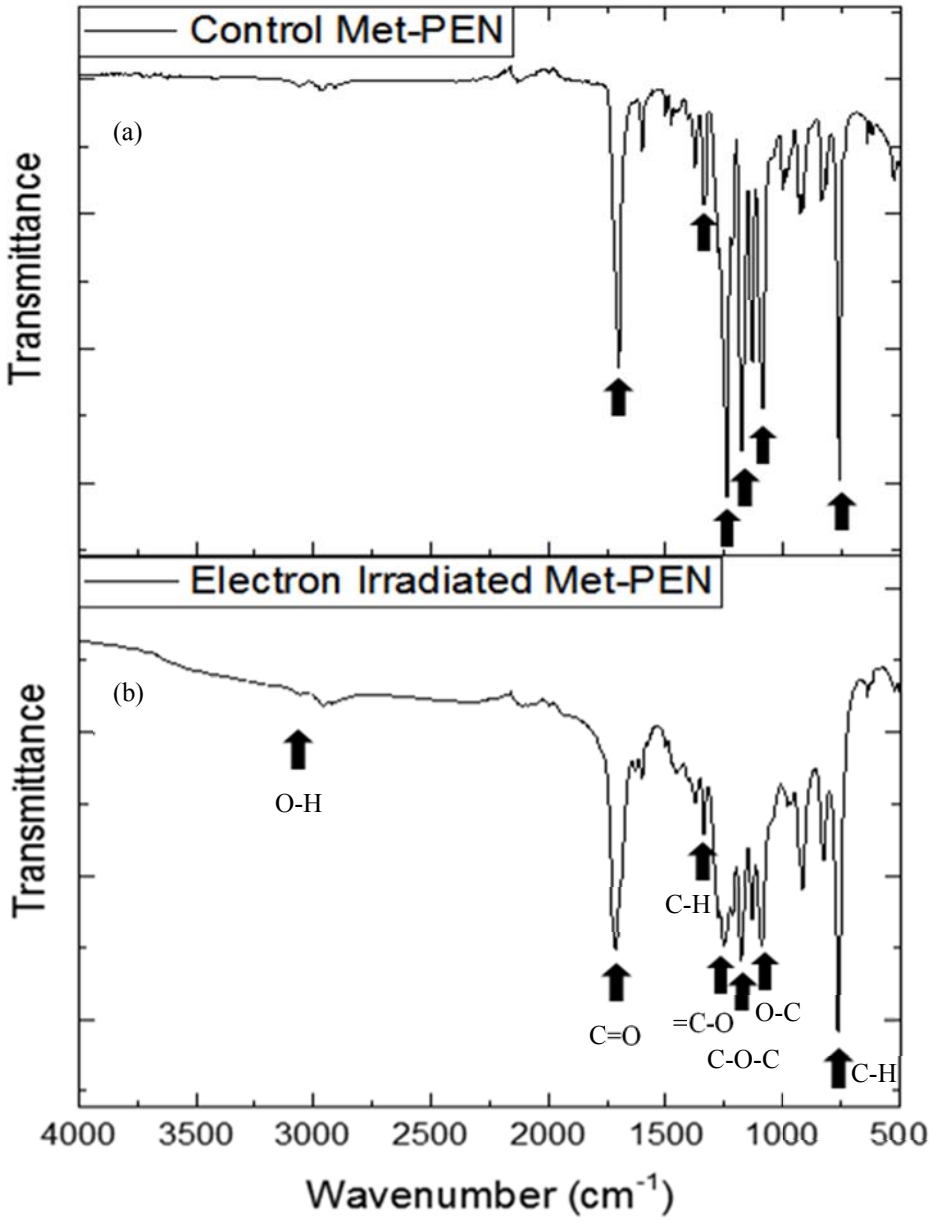



**Figure 10.** FT-IR spectra of (a) control and (b) electron irradiated PEN films.

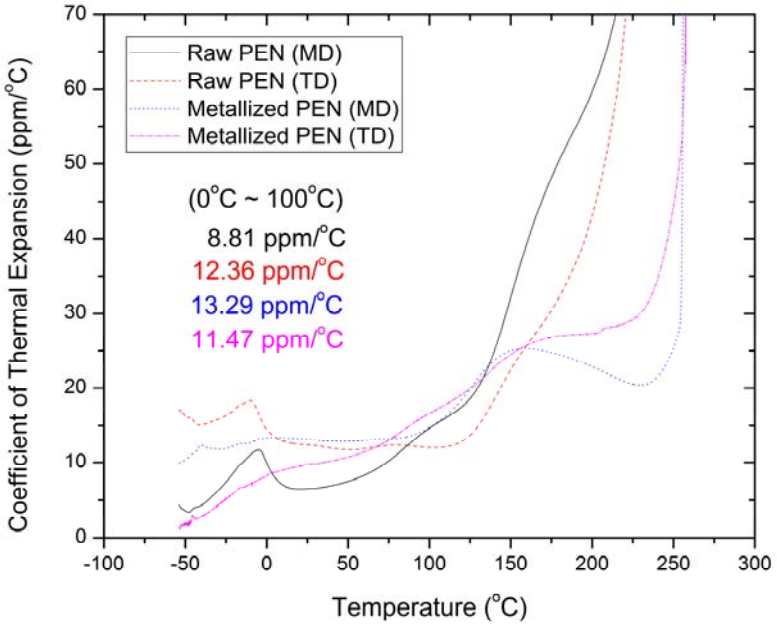



**Figure 11.** CTE of raw PEN films and metallized PEN films.

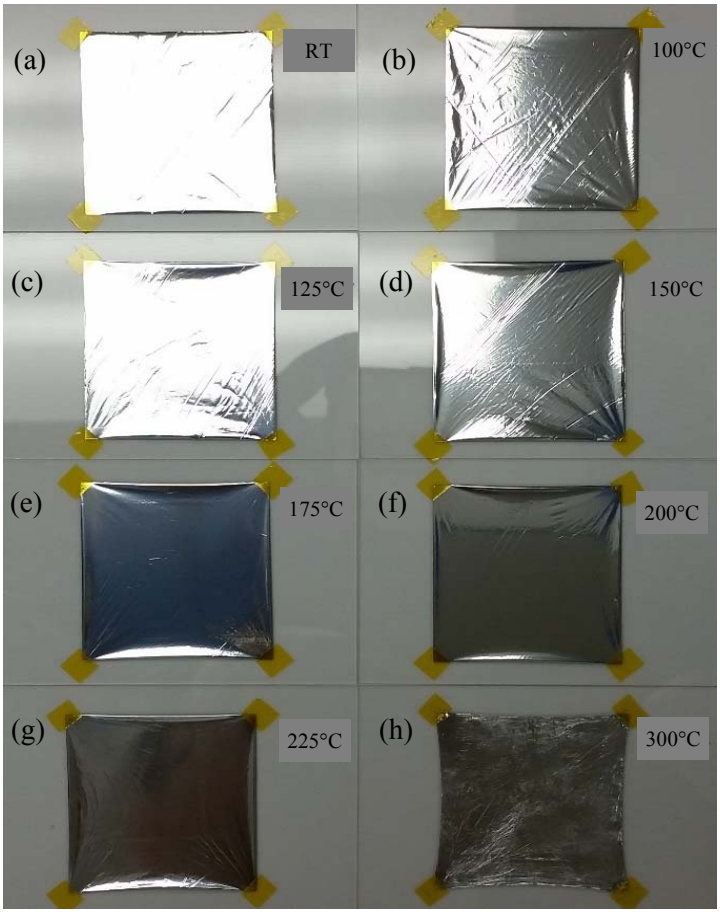



**Figure 12.** Appearance of metallized PEN films after thermal aging test at (a) room temperature, (b) 100°C, (c) 125°C, (d) 150°C, (e) 175°C, (f) 200°C, (g) 225°C and (h) 300°C.

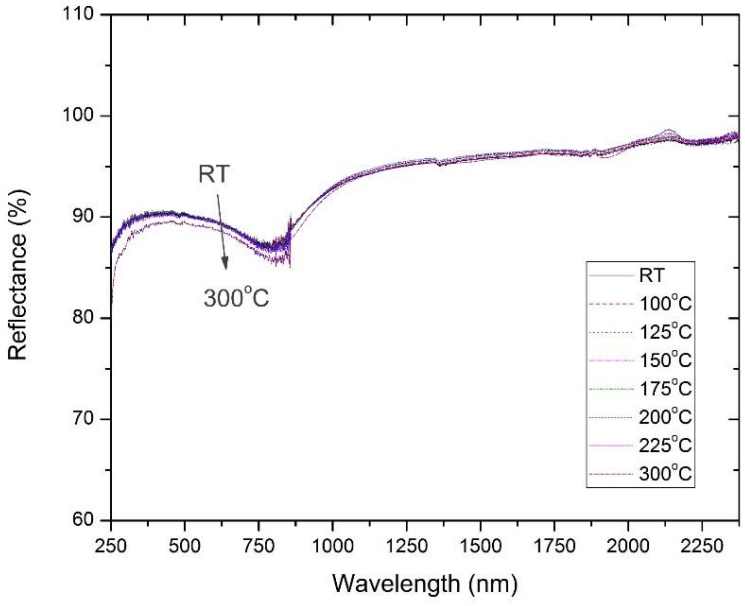



**Figure 13.** Spectra reflectance of metallized PEN films after thermal aging at various temperatures from RT to 300°C.

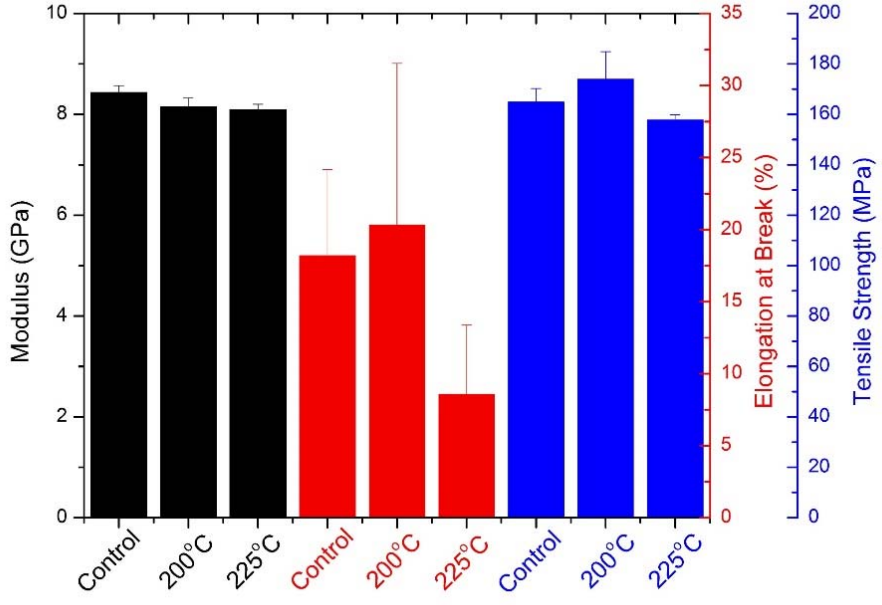



**Figure 14.** Mechanical properties of metallized PEN films after thermal aging at various temperatures of room temperature (control), 200 and 225°C.

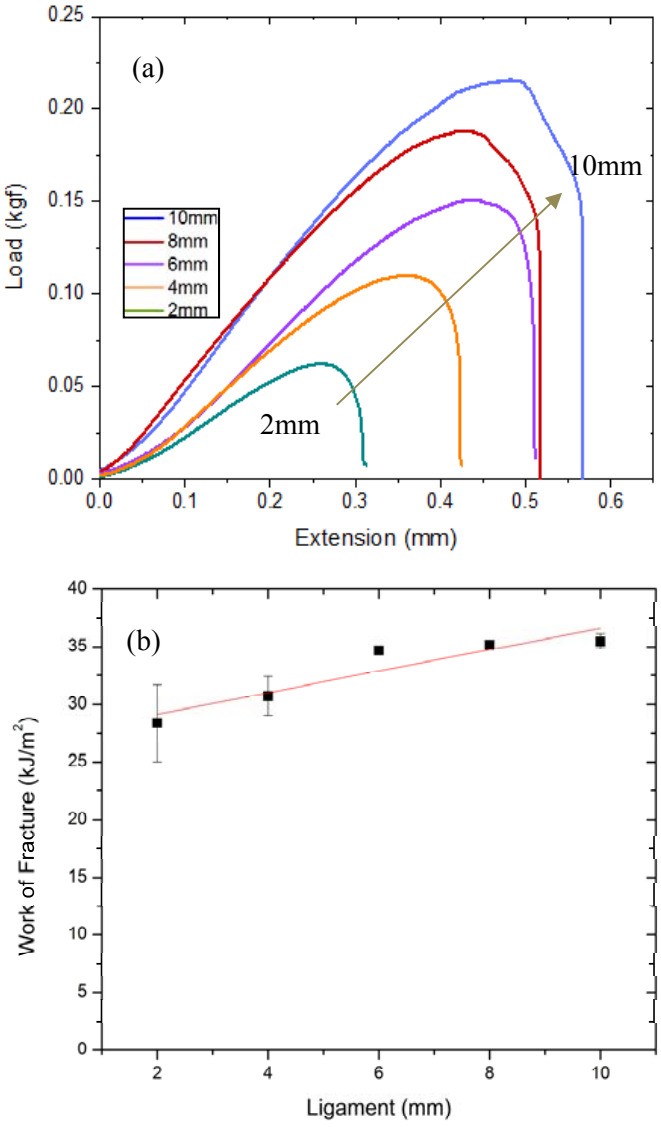



**Figure 15.** Mode I tear fracture properties of metallized PEN films. (a) Load vs. displacement profile and (b) specific total work of fracture (*wf*) vs. ligament length (*L*).

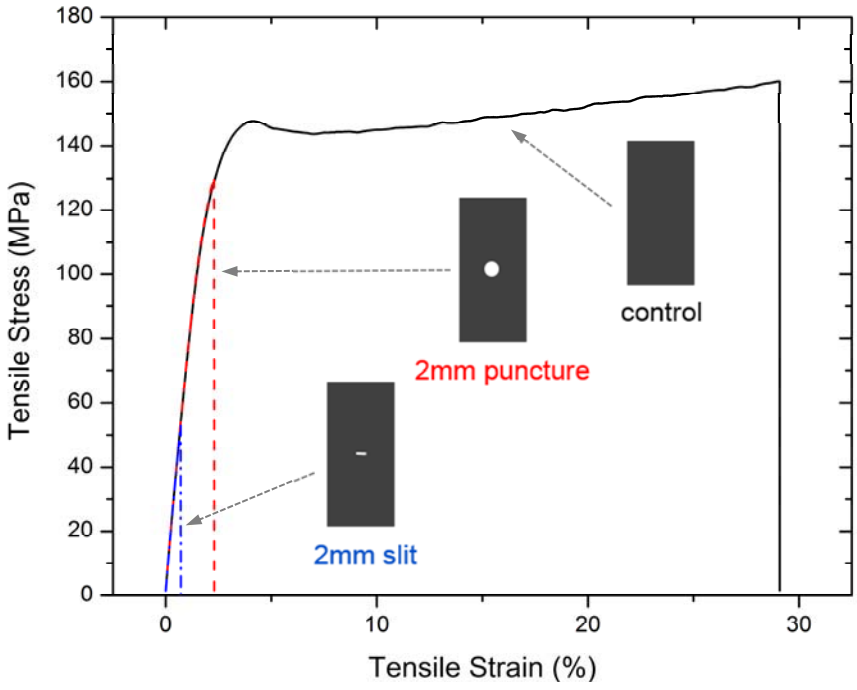



**Figure 16.** Tensile properties of metallized PEN films with simulated impact damage.

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For long duration missions of solar sails, the sail material needs to survive harsh space environments and the degradation of the sail material controls operational lifetime. Therefore, understanding the effects of the space environment on the sail membrane is essential for mission success. In this study, we investigated the effect of simulated space environments of ionizing radiation and thermal aging. Simulated potential damage effects on the mechanical, thermal and optical properties of a commercial off the shelf (COTS) polyester solar sail membrane to assess the degradation mechanisms on a feasible solar sail. The solar sail membrane was exposed to high energy electrons (about 70 keV and 10 nA/cm2), and the physical properties were characterized. After about 8.3 Grad dose, the tensile modulus, tensile strength and failure strain of the sail membrane decreased by 20 to 95%. The aluminum reflective layer was damaged and partially delaminated but it did not show any significant change in solar absorbance or thermal emittance. The mechanical properties of a pre-cracked sample, simulating potential impact damage of the sail membrane, as well as thermal aging effects on metallized PEN (polyethylene naphthalate) film, will be discussed.

**15. SUBJECT TERMS**

Degradation; Membrane; Radiation; Solar sail; Space environment

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